



# *Success Story*

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## *Buffalo Wild Wings Continues to Expand in Delaware*

By Jayne Armstrong

After spending 25 and 15 years, respectively, in every aspect of the restaurant industry, Bobby Pancake and Steve Wheat have quickly become one of Delaware's entrepreneurial success stories.

Pancake and his business partner Steve Wheat are the owners of five Buffalo Wild Wings Grill & Bar franchises in Bear, Middletown, Dover, Newark and Wilmington. They recently opened their sixth restaurant in Bel Air, Md.

"I was in the right place at the right time," said Pancake, managing member of High 5 LLC, the operating arm of the restaurant group, in explaining his eventual jump into small business ownership.

The business partners met while working for Buffalo Wild Wings, Inc., when Pancake was the senior director of company operations and Wheat was the local store marketing manager. They spent many business trips discussing their dream of starting their own restaurant and developing their business plan. At the time, the franchise was in the process of transitioning from a local wing joint targeting college campuses to today's national model of a suburban, family-oriented sports bar and grill.

Their timing was perfect. In the past 12 years, Buffalo Wild Wings has grown from less than 50 restaurants to more than 625 locations today. Pancake and Wheat own the development rights for the entire state of Delaware and three counties in Maryland.

Since opening in 2003, the Delaware restaurants have more than doubled in sales and expanded to 350 employees. Not bad, considering Pancake and Wheat introduced the Buffalo Wild Wings brand with the first restaurant on the East Coast.

When it came time to finance their endeavor, Pancake and Wheat turned to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) for assistance. PNC Bank financed the working capital, equipment and construction of the first three restaurants in Bear, Middletown and Dover with SBA 7(a) guaranteed loans.

"We couldn't have done it without the SBA," said Pancake. "It helped us secure the start up financing."

For Pancake it all started with a part-time job as a cook and chicken cutter at a local KFC franchise in his native West Virginia. He ultimately spent 10 years with KFC working his way up to regional manager. A five-year stint as senior director of company operations for Roasters Corporation, the franchisor for Kenny Rogers Roasters, followed before the critical move to Buffalo Wild Wings in 1997. Before becoming his own boss, Pancake served as the senior director of company operations and reported directly to the company's chief executive officer.

Wheat also had an early start in the restaurant business by working at a Burger King in St. Paul, Minn., when he was only 14 years old. After several jobs and completing his bachelor's degree in marketing at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, he returned to the food industry working for Aramark in Campus Dining where he worked his way up to marketing manager for several universities in Minnesota. He was recruited from the University of Minnesota in 1999, when he became the local store marketing manager for company owned units at Buffalo Wild Wings, Inc. This is where Wheat and Pancake started work together in their respective roles.

Pancake and Wheat credit their willingness to relocate and to learn every aspect of the business for their success. Extensive knowledge of the restaurant industry also gave them instant credibility in securing the start up financing.

"When you have a brand like Buffalo Wild Wings behind you it is much less risky to open a new restaurant," said Pancake.

"There was not much of a learning curve to go through when we both had extensive knowledge of the concept," said Wheat.

Buffalo Wild Wings' atmosphere attracts families, young professionals and sports enthusiasts alike. In fact, many college alumni groups, including West Virginia University, Penn State and Virginia Tech, claim Buffalo Wild Wings as their fan headquarters during the college football season.

Pancake and Wheat also have made a major investment in the local communities served by their restaurants. Not only do they sponsor community programs such as little league baseball teams, but they often host fundraisers that benefit local charities.

Success has not been without its adversities. Within six weeks of opening the first restaurant, Pancake and Wheat's other business partners died unexpectedly. It was huge personal set back for the entrepreneurs.

The recent economic downturn has been a challenge as well. Although more families are turning to economical alternatives like Buffalo Wild Wings, every purchase coming in the back door is more expensive today. Pancake has learned to run a tighter operation and work smarter to keep the prices low.

Pancake and Wheat have quickly learned the most important values of small business ownership: everyone else is paid first and the owners are paid last. They wouldn't trade their career path for anything. They have been exposed to things as owners that they never would have experienced on the corporate side.

For Bobby Pancake and Steve Wheat, years of perseverance and hard work have paid off. More importantly, they are still having fun just winging it.

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